

# LEO STRAUSS

## The Re-education of Axis Countries Concerning the Jews

1. To state my thesis from the outset: I do not believe that the question which we are discussing tonight is a very important question. I believe that reparations, relief, emigration are infinitely more important topics. In trying to substantiate this view, I shall be compelled to depart from views which seem to be widely held in this country. I shall be compelled to be blunt. I apologize in advance if I shall hurt, against my serious intention, anyone's feelings.
2. In the remarks which I am going to make, I shall limit myself to *Germany*, in the first place, because I have *some* firsthand knowledge of Germany, whereas I have *none* of any other Axis country. It is only fair that I should add that even my firsthand knowledge of Germany is very limited: I left

Delivered at the public session on "The Re-education of Axis Countries Concerning the Jews" of the annual meeting of the Conference on Jewish Relations, Sunday, November 7, 1943, at 8:15 PM at the New School for Social Research. The other speakers were Dr. Esther Brunauer and Prof. Horace Kallen, and the chair was Professor Salo Baron. Brunauer, author of *The Nazi State* (Washington, DC: American Association of University Women, 1934), had been active in interventionist groups before the United States entered the war and as the secretary of the International Relations Office of the American Association of University Women had helped to bring women scholars from Nazi Germany to the United States. She went to work for the State Department in 1944, was accused by Sen. Joseph McCarthy of being a Communist and dismissed as a security risk in 1952, and died in 1958. Kallen (1882–1974), born in Berenstadt, Germany and educated at Harvard, was one of the original core faculty and a professor of social philosophy at the New School, author of *Art and Freedom* (New York: Duell, Sloan, and Pearce, 1942) and many other books, an active Zionist, and originator of the concept of cultural pluralism. Baron (1895–1989) born in Tarnow, Austria, and educated at the University of Vienna and the Jewish Theological Seminary there, was professor of Jewish History at Columbia University from 1930–1963 and author of the classic 27-volume *Social and Religious History of the Jews* (Columbia University Press, 1952–1983).

Strauss did not publish this talk though he kept a letter from Otto Nathan, then professor of economics of Vassar College, of November 13, 1943, saying he had done "an excellent job" and expressing the hope that it would be published. See Leo Strauss Papers, Box 28 folder 4, Regenstein Library Special Collections, University of Chicago. Nathan (1893–1984) was author of *The Nazi Economic System* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1944) and a close associate of Albert Einstein; he later lost a teaching position at N.Y.U. and was denied a passport in 1952 because of alleged left-wing associations until a judge ordered the State Department to grant him one.

that country in 1932 and never returned to it afterward. Secondly, the problem before us concerns Germany much more than any other country. The other European Axis countries are as much the victims as they are the allies of Germany. We do not know yet whether Hungary and Rumania in particular will not become cobelligerents of the United Nations. These smaller countries can say, with *some* show of truth, that the Nazi doctrine was an *alien* doctrine imposed on them by the fear of the armed force of a foreign nation. The Germans, on the other hand, may, at some future date, reject the Nazi doctrine as an abomination: they can *never* reject it as an *alien*, as an *imported* doctrine.

3. Even if we limit our question to Germany, it remains an iffy question. When we speak of the re-education of Germany, we assume, of course, that the war will be won *and* that Anglo-Saxon-Russian cooperation will survive the cessation<sup>1</sup> of hostilities. We assume also that the bulk of Germany will *not* be occupied by the Red Army. For the Russian notions about the goal, or the methods, of re-education are presumably different from those acceptable to the liberal powers. Atlantic Charter: the politics of the present administration of U.S. and of the British gov[ernmen]t.<sup>2</sup>
4. One must make this remark about the conditions of German re-education in general. For the question of re-education of Germany concerning the *Jews* is clearly only a part, if a particularly difficult part, of the question of the re-education of Germany in general. Permit me to state my view on the general question somewhat more definitely.

When we speak of re-education, we imply that the *wrong* education, which is to be replaced by a *second* education, by a *re*-education, is of crucial political importance. We are apt to imply that the root of the difficulties is some sort of education, of indoctrination, viz. the Nazi indoctrination: Is this really the case? And how far is it the case? We must beware of taking the Nazi doctrines, their *Rassenkunde* and their geopolitics and what not, too seriously. What was important, what did influence the Germans, what *educated* the Germans were not those pedantic follies by themselves, but the prospect opened up by Nazi rearmament, by Nazi diplomacy, and by Nazi arms, of the solution of *all* German problems by a short and decisive war. And, after the hope of a short victorious war was shattered by the Spitfires, the prospect of the solution of all German problems by a new Hubertusburg peace<sup>3</sup> on a planetary scale. If we disregard the German high school teacher, if we consider the mass of

<sup>1</sup>"ceasing" is crossed out.

<sup>2</sup>This sentence added in pencil.

<sup>3</sup>The Treaty of Hubertusburg at the end of the Seven Years War in 1763 established Prussia's place as a great European power. I owe this reference to Meredith Edwards.

the Germans, we shall find, I believe, that what guided their outlook, and hence their actions, was merely the crucial *implication* of the Nazi doctrine, viz. the implication that the needs of the German people as interpreted by the most efficient man in the land are the supreme law, not subject to any higher consideration. To put it bluntly, the Nazi education consisted in this: that they convinced a substantial part of the German people that large scale and efficiently prepared and perpetrated crime pays. I remember the argument of German students in the early 1920s: a country whose policies are *not*<sup>4</sup> fettered by moral considerations is, other things being equal, twice as strong as a<sup>5</sup> country whose policies are fettered by moral considerations. For 50% of all possible ways and means are rejected, as immoral, by the moralistic countries, whereas *all* ways and means are open to the unscrupulous country. It is evident that this doctrine is subject to the test of sense-experience and, hence, that the Nazi doctrine is a force only as long as Nazi strategy is successful. The victory of the Anglo-Saxon-Russian combination, if followed by a just and stern and stable peace, will be *the* refutation of the Nazi doctrine, and thus will uproot Nazi education. The re-education of Germany will not take place in classrooms: it is taking place right now in the open air on the banks of the Dnjepr<sup>6</sup> and among the ruins of the German cities. It will be consummated by a meeting of British-American and of Russian tanks in Unter den Linden, and by the harmonious cooperation of the Western and Eastern occupying forces in bringing to trial the war criminals. No proof is as convincing, as *educating*, as the demonstration *ad oculos*: once the greatest German blockheads, impervious to any rational argument and to any feeling of mercy, will have seen *with their own eyes* that no brutality however cunning, no cruelty however shameless can dispense them from the necessity of relying on their victims' *pity*—once they have seen *this*, the decisive part of the re-educational process will have come to a successful conclusion.

5. But—you will say—it is one thing for the Germans to realize that the Nazi doctrine was erroneous, and Nazi education was disastrous; it is another thing for the Germans to discover the true doctrine and the right type of education. And this other thing is exactly the purpose of re-education. We are then confronted with the question "what is the true doctrine?" We shall not hesitate to answer: liberal democracy. But will liberal democracy have any appeal to, any attraction for, the Germans? A German form of collectivism perhaps—an authoritarian regime of the bureaucracy based on a resuscitated authoritarian

<sup>4</sup>The word "not" inserted twice.

<sup>5</sup>The word "policy" crossed out.

<sup>6</sup>The Red Army crossed the Dnieper in early October 1943 and took Kiev November 6.

interpretation of Christianity perhaps—but not liberalism.<sup>7</sup> A form of government which is merely imposed by a victorious enemy, will not last—to say nothing of the fact that Russia is not exactly a liberal democracy. Where are the roots, in German soil, of liberal democracy? Of course, there is a tradition of German liberal democracy—but we have to add, a tradition of political *inefficiency* of German liberal democracy. It came to power only once: after Germany's defeat in the last war. Seven years later, long before the economic world crisis, it was already doomed: the election of Hindenburg to the presidency of the Reich in 1925, and, more visibly, the demonstrations in the streets of the German cities after the election, showed to everyone who did not deliberately blind himself, where Germany was going. Nothing really *known* permits us to indulge the hope that the politically efficient part of the German people has changed their minds as regards liberal democracy. Until the contrary has been proved, I shall *not* consider the Free German Committees<sup>8</sup> as representing the politically efficient part of the German people.

But let us give Germany the benefit of the doubt: under no circumstances, however, can we evade the question as to *who* is going to do the re-educating? Only Germans, only Germans who remained in Germany and shared all the degradation and all the misery<sup>9</sup> of Nazi rule and of defeat, can do it. Only *they* will be able to speak a language understandable to post-Hitlerian Germany. Certainly no foreigners are in [a] position to re-educate Germany. And this for three reasons: The first is German pride. I say "pride" and not "conceit." For a nation which has the pride, and besides the glorious spiritual tradition of Germany, the idea that they *as a nation* should have to sit<sup>10</sup> at the feet of foreign nations is unbearable. Or the idea, that they *as a nation* should have to be reminded of *their* tradition by foreigners. The second reason is the intellectual climate. The practical and commonsensical and hence theoretically not radical temper of the Anglo-Saxons was always different from the German temper. But after the intellectual upheaval of the last 20 or 30 years, it is certainly not the mild and easy-going language of Anglo-Saxon humanitarianism which is going to appeal to the Germans of the present generation. Only Germans who have stayed in Germany, will have that particular intellectual, and nervous, tension which will be required in anyone who wants to reach German ears and minds and souls. The third reason: the

<sup>7</sup>This sentence inserted at the bottom of the page.

<sup>8</sup>Anti-Nazi German exiles had formed Free German Committees first in Moscow and later in London.

<sup>9</sup>The phrase "and all the responsibility" is crossed out.

<sup>10</sup>The words "to sit" are written twice but the first time crossed out.

Germans are going to question the *competence* of the Anglo-Saxons. They are amazingly well informed about all the deficiencies of liberal democracy in the countries concerned: Jim Crow, India, etc. They will emphasize the difference between the Anglo-Saxon doctrine (the Atlantic Charter) and the Anglo-Saxon practice. They are not familiar with the practice, and the spirit, of *compromise*: they do not know that a just law which is merely on the statute book and not observed in practice, acts nevertheless as a humanizing influence; hence they will speak, as they did speak and as they do speak, of *hypocrisy*.

A nation may take another nation as its model: but no nation can presume to educate another nation which has a high tradition of its own. Such a presumption creates resentment, and you cannot educate people who resent your being their educator. If the Germans were to submit to re-education by foreigners, [they]<sup>11</sup> would lose their self-respect and therewith all sense of responsibility. But everything depends on making the Germans responsible—in every meaning of the term. The re-education of Germany should be exclusively the affair of Germans. On the other hand, the peace of the world, i.e. the security of the non-German nations against the repetition of German aggression, must be exclusively the affair of the non-German nations. Only by thus clearly delimiting the responsibilities, do you guarantee responsible conduct. Only by limiting themselves to their *own* business, namely to the protection of their *own* security, can the United Nations influence the re-education of Germany: if the United Nations show the Germans by firm action, by intelligent distrust, by vigilance in arms that all prospects of German world domination and even of German expansion have *gone*, and have gone *forever*, the Germans will have been driven back to internal colonization, I mean, to the cultivation of their own spiritual tradition and of any other innocent pursuits they might choose.

6. "Re-education of Germany" is then, to my mind, open to grave doubts. A further doubt, a still graver doubt, concerns the re-education of Germany concerning the *Jews*. When I give thought to the re-education of Germany concerning the Jews, I, being a Jew, cannot help thinking constantly of one basic question which overshadows all other questions: how can a Jew who has some sense of honour, be interested at all in what *Germans*<sup>12</sup> think about *Jews*? I cannot disregard<sup>13</sup>, I am not *permitted* to disregard, for a single moment the fact that in the whole course of human history, there has been only *one* political community whose basic principle, whose *raison d'être*, whose very soul was nothing but

<sup>11</sup>The manuscript has "their."

<sup>12</sup>"Germany" changed in the manuscript to "Germans."

<sup>13</sup>The word "for" is crossed out after "disregard."

the utter degradation of Jews and Judaism: that state is Germany. The state calls itself "Aryan" —but the term "Aryan," this product of this barbaric pedantry, has no intrinsic meaning whatsoever: its only meaning is negative, polemical: an Aryan simply means a non-Jew. But if the objection is made that the Nazis are not Germany, I would answer that a nation in the political sense of the term is the politically relevant, the politically efficient *part* of the nation: when in a free election, about 45% of the Germans voted for Hitler, and the other 55% were in a condition of utter confusion and helplessness, then the 45% *are* the Germans—from any political point of view. Until the Germans have purified themselves by spontaneously giving us satisfaction for the unique humiliation they have offered to us, no self-respecting Jew can, and no Jew ought to, be interested in Germany.

7. Alas—you will say—this language of national honour sounds hollow in the mouth of a member of a small and weak nation, of a nation without tanks and airplanes. We are reduced to such a condition of misery that we must be grateful if a handful of Jews who somehow manage to survive Theresienstadt, will be permitted to live in Germany. For where should they go? Let us then disregard honour—let us speak of material needs only. I think we must insist, when the final reckoning comes, on indemnification,<sup>14</sup> on reparation, on restoration of robbed property. We must do this, not as individuals, who by now may have become citizens of the victorious states,<sup>15</sup> but through agencies representing the<sup>16</sup> Jews as Jews. For who should claim the robbed property of the thousands and thousands whom they have butchered and have no heirs left? To say nothing of the fact that the government of the U.S. in particular protects claims for property damages by those persons only who were citizens of the U.S.A. at the time when such damage occurred.<sup>17</sup> We shall then belong, in our collective capacity, to the enemies of Germany, visibly or invisibly sitting on the other side of the peace table, on the side of the many nations which are separated, for a long time to come, from the Germans by<sup>18</sup> rivers of blood. For it will be the Germans, the de-nazified Germans, and not the Nazis alone, who will have to pay the reparations. I for one fail to see how life for Jews in Germany could be bearable under these circumstances.

<sup>14</sup>The phrase "on restoration," crossed out here.

<sup>15</sup>Strauss himself at about this time was applying for US citizenship, which he received in 1944. He received an acknowledgment of his preliminary petition for naturalization dated December 7, 1943, and filed his naturalization petition February 1, 1944. Leo Strauss papers Box 28 folder 1.

<sup>16</sup>The word "the" inserted above the line.

<sup>17</sup>This sentence was inserted at the bottom of the page.

<sup>18</sup>The word "the" is crossed out.

8. Let us assume, however, that these doubts will be disposed of in some miraculous way—let us assume that Jews can or will or must live in Germany, as German citizens. In that case, we doubtless would be interested in a change of the German view of Jews, and, therefore, perhaps, in re-education of Germany concerning the Jews. Here again, I would have to raise the question: who is going to do the re-educating? Certainly not we Jews. A Jew trying to convince, by argument, the Germans that the Jews are decent and intelligent and physically fit and may have blue eyes and blond hair and I do not know what, does not cut an impressive figure. He would be open to the attack that he is speaking *pro domo*, that all his rational argument is serving his self-interest. The Germans are particularly sensitive to everything which has even a semblance of special pleading; they would just despise such an educator. Nor can non-Jewish Americans do the job. For, as I indicated before, the Germans are amazingly well informed about the strength of anti-Jewish feelings in America. To say nothing of more recent developments, the restricted area was practically unknown in pre-Hitler Germany. Only Germans can educate the Germans concerning the Jews.

But *which* Germans? I do not believe that the *liberal* Germans could do it. Liberalism never carried a decisive weight in Germany. And now, after the extinction of the middle class, the traditional bearer of liberalism, the chances of liberalism are probably still smaller than they ever were.

To arrive at a more satisfactory answer, I suggest that we briefly compare the German situation with the situation in this country. In one respect, the situation in Germany was, and is, better than it is in this country. Many refugees coming from Europe to this country are amazed to find that so many Catholics in this country are so hostile to Jews:<sup>19</sup> German Catholicism was much less anti-Jewish. The German Catholic clergy and a part of the Catholic intelligentsia *might* then become one significant agent of German re-education concerning the Jews.

On the other hand, two important groups of educators are much more liberal in this country than their opposite numbers in Germany are: the high school and college teachers and the Protestant clergy. The German Oberlehrer and the German Lutheran pastor were perhaps the most important carriers of the anti-Jewish virus. (The term “carrier” is not adequate, for, as the Concise Oxford Dictionary tells me, a carrier is a person or animal that *without catching a disease* conveys its germs; but you will understand what I mean.) I do not believe that the attitude of the Oberlehrer will have changed even after the defeat; I see no reason

<sup>19</sup>Consider Father Charles Coughlin.

why it should. *They* did not accept the Nazi doctrine, or the Pan-German doctrine for any low consideration of earthly success: *they* accepted it on grounds of morality; *they* will not be refuted by defeat; they will wait for the second coming of the Führer once he has been put to sleep in the Kyffhäuser,<sup>20</sup> just as they have been waiting for the Emperor Barbarossa.

The situation of the Lutheran clergy is different. Anti-Jewish attitudes belonged to their tradition: give the Jew his livelihood, but don't honour him, was the Lutheran principle. The role played by Stöcker<sup>21</sup> and some of his brethren for the emergence of political anti-Semitism in Germany is well-known. But they have now, for the first time, made the experience<sup>22</sup> that anti-Judaism is apt to lead to anti-Christianism. By no means all Lutheran clergymen, but a substantial part of them, had to stand up against the Nazis. The most *conservative* part of the Lutheran clergy, the Confessional Church, and a neo-orthodox group, the Barmen-group,<sup>23</sup> i.e. clergymen following the lines of Karl Barth, but even *some* less orthodox clergymen did not give in. For the first time in its history, Lutheranism had to fight a battle which centered around the Jews, *against* an anti-Jewish government and an anti-Jewish popular movement. On the other hand, we have to add that they did not defend Jews as Jews or Judaism as Judaism: they defended the O.T.<sup>24</sup> and the *baptised* Jews. They rejected racialism as irreconcilable with Christianity: they did not fight for legal, social, or political equality of the German Jews as such. As far as I know, certain Lutheran clergymen helped Jews in a practical way during the persecution<sup>25</sup> of 1938, but I do not think that there is a single statement by the<sup>26</sup> Protestant clergy or Protestant theological faculties concerning the political rights of Jews.

It is perfectly possible that the so-called neo-paganism of the Nazis has brought about a rapprochement between Christians as Christians and

<sup>20</sup>A mountain in Saxony-Anhalt where, according to legend, Emperor Frederick Barbarossa sleeps bewitched in a cave, waiting for the time when he will restore German greatness.

<sup>21</sup>Adolf Stöcker (1835–1909), Lutheran clergyman, Reichstag member, and founder of the Christian Social Party, the Lutheran Social Congress, and the United Lutheran Workers League, who helped push the Conservative Party to adopt anti-Semitism. See Peter Pulzer, *The Rise of Political Anti-Semitism in Germany and Austria* (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, 1964, 1988), pp. 85–97, 111–119.

<sup>22</sup>Three letters at the start of this word are darkened or crossed out as if LS had started to write something else, perhaps "observation."

<sup>23</sup>The Barmen Synod organized by Karl Barth, Martin Niemöller, and others in May 1934 issued the Barmen Declaration, the basis of the Confessing Church that opposed National Socialism and the established Lutheran church.

<sup>24</sup>Old Testament.

<sup>25</sup>The word "pogrom" crossed out and "persecution" inserted.

<sup>26</sup>The word "the" inserted.



Jews as Jews even in Germany. If this is the case, if the Protestant clergy in particular has realized that they must abandon their anti-Jewish traditions, it can be presumed that they will use their influence with the German people in a desirable direction. Naturally, no one can tell how great the influence of the Protestant clergy in post-Hitler Germany will be. If the war and the defeat of the Nazis lead to a reawakening of Christian faith and manners in Germany, it is not impossible, I believe, that the leaders of German Catholicism and Protestantism will make some efforts towards the re-education of the Germans concerning the Jews. I would be false to the trust you put in me by asking me to address you on this subject, if I went one single step beyond this conditional sentence.

But I would be unfair to those Germans who did not waver in their decent attitude, if I did not report to you a remark which a German made to me the other day. He advised me to tell you his conviction that the mass of the Germans are simply ashamed of what has been done to Jews in Germany and in the *name* of Germany; and that, after the war, Germany will be the most pro-Jewish country in the world.<sup>27</sup> If I were a German, if I had ever been a German, I might be prepared, or perhaps in duty bound, to have that hope. Perhaps these hopes are not unfounded: in that case, the re-education of the Germans concerning the Jews will be even superfluous. *I shall not believe before I have seen.*

<sup>27</sup> A clause is crossed out here: "while non Jewish feelings will be rampant all over the world."